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AN ENGLISH CHRISTMAS PLAY¹

BY ANTOINETTE TAYLOR

THIS Mummer's Play was first brought to light by the study of folk-plays in the class of Miss Jennie M. A. Jones of the Central High School, St. Louis, who appreciated its value and brought it to the attention of others. Miss Helen Dorrill, a member of the class, took down the words from the recitation of her father, who had taken part in the play as a boy in the rural community of Broadway, Worcestershire, England, at least thirty-five years ago. Some of it he could not remember. He is the authority also for the following account of the place and manner of the performance and of the costume of the actors.

The players were boys, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty or twenty-one. They were trained by a much older man, at whose home the rehearsals usually took place. Besides training the boys, this man also took a part himself. Sometimes he was Old Father Christmas, sometimes he was Beelzebub.

The players went from one farmhouse to another, asking permission to give their play. This is what one of the players would say when asking permission to perform: "Would you like to hear the mummers to-night?"

In old English farmhouses there are usually two kitchens, — a front kitchen and a back kitchen. The back kitchen was used for a waiting-room; the front kitchen was the place where the play was given. The kitchen floors were of smooth white stone. Both rooms were heated by means of large open fireplaces, and lighted by large brown candles, usually set in "horn lanterns" fastened to the walls.

The costumes of the players were very crude, intended merely to suggest the characters. Old Father Christmas wore a fur cap and fur gloves, a long red coat, and top boots. He had a wig and beard of long white hair, and the end of his nose was reddened. Beelzebub wore a large black hat, called a dripping-pan, and a long black coat, and in his hand carried a club (usually the club was carried over his shoulder). The Italian Doctor wore a top hat and a swallow-tail coat. The Valiant Soldier wore a blue soldier's suit and soldier's cap. Little Dick Nipp wore a hat with a very wide brim, a short coat, and carried a long stick, on the end of which a pig's bladder was tied. He was the "fool" or fun-maker of the play. St. George wore a small hat with a feather

¹ Contributed as part of the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Missouri Folk-Lore Society, March 13, 1909. [Cf. T. F. Ordish, *Folk Lore*, ii, 314 ff., iv, 149 ff.; J. M. Manly, *Specimens of the Pre-Shakspearean Drama*, I, 289 ff.; E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, i, 182 ff., 205 ff., ii, 270 ff.; Arthur Beatty, *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy*, xv, ii, 273 ff. — EDITORS.

in it, a dark red coat, knee-breeches, and low shoes, and carried a sword.

The play was in two parts. After the performance, the players were usually rewarded with hot spiced ale or cider and bread and cheese, and in addition to this a sum of from two to five shillings was collected.

PART I

Enter FATHER CHRISTMAS

In comes I,
Old Christmas, Christmas, or Christmas not,
I hope old Father Christmas will never be forgot.
Christmas comes but once a year,
And when it comes it brings good cheer.
Roast beef, plum pudding, and mince pie,
There's no old Father Christmas loves better than I.

Enter BEELZEBUB

A room, a room, brave gallant boys!
And give us room to reign,
For we have come to show our bold activity,
Here on a merry Christmas time, —
Activity of youth, activity of age,
The like was never acted upon any stage.
If you don't believe what I say,
Enter in St. George, and clear the way.

In comes ST. GEORGE

St. George, that man of courage bold,
With sword and spear all by my side,
Hoping to gain the twelve crowns of gold.
'T was I who slew the fiery dragon,
And brought him to the slaughter,
And by those fiery means I hope
To gain the Queen of Egypt's daughter.
Seven long years I was kept in a close cave,
Where I made my sad and grievous mourn.
I have led the fair Sarepta from the snake,
Which neither man nor mortal would undertake.
I brought them all most courageously,
And still I gain the victory.
Show *me* the man who dare me!

Enter the TURKISH KNIGHT

I am the man who dare fight thee,
The Turkish Knight,
Come from my own Turkish land to fight.
I will fight St. George, that man of courage bold.
If his blood is hot I will quickly make it cold.

ST. GEORGE *and the* TURKISH KNIGHT *fight with back swords*

TURKISH KNIGHT, *dropping on one knee*

Hold, hold, St. George! Another word
From thee I have to crave.

Spare me this time, and I will arise
To be thy Turkish slave.

ST. GEORGE

Arise, arise, thou Turkish Knight!
Go over to thine own Turkish lands and fight.
Tell them there the champions grow in England.
Tell them there the wonders I have done,
I have slain ten thousand for thy one.

TURKISH KNIGHT

No, rather than tell them that,
I cut thee, hew thee as small as flies,
And send thee to Jamaica to make mince pies.

ST. GEORGE

Mince pies I do not like.
But another battle then, and I will fight.

ST. GEORGE *kills the KNIGHT. Enter BEELZEBUB*
A room! A room!

And let the prudent King of Spain come in!

Enter KING OF SPAIN

In comes the prudent King of Spain!
All with my glittering sword,
I have cut and slain St. George.

ST. GEORGE

Thou prudent King of Spain,
Hast thou come here to fight?

KING OF SPAIN

Yes, bold champion, and I think it is my right,
And with thee I have come to fight.

ST. GEORGE

Firstly, thou hast challenged me, King,
Secondly, thou hast challenged me.
Stand forth! thou figure of a tree,
And see who gains the victory!

The KING OF SPAIN is killed. Enter BEELZEBUB
A room! A room!

And let the valiant soldier in.

Enter SOLDIER

In comes the valiant soldier,
Cut and Slasher is my name,
All from the fiery wars of Spain.
'T was I and seven more
Who slew eleven score,
And could have slain twelve thousand more,
All brave marching men of war.
Many a battle have I been in,
And still fight St. George, that noble King.

SOLDIER killed by ST. GEORGE. Enter BEELZEBUB

A room! A room! A gallant room!
And let the little Italian Doctor walk in.

Enter ITALIAN DOCTOR

In comes the little Italian Doctor,
Lately come from Rome, France, and Spain.
I carry a little vial bottle
In the waist of my break, with which I can cure.

BEELZEBUB

What canst thou cure?

ITALIAN DOCTOR

What thou canst not cure, old Dad.

BEELZEBUB

Old Dad, what's that?

ITALIAN DOCTOR

Rheumatic gout,
Pains within, and pains without.
Bring me an old woman
Of three score years and ten
With the knuckle of her little toe broke,
And I can set it again.

BEELZEBUB

Set it then.

ITALIAN DOCTOR *goes round the slain, who all lie on the floor, and
says over each, —*

Drop on thy brow,
Drop on thy heart,
Arise up, Jack,
And take thy part.

All arise and are cured.

PART II

SWEET MOLL *walks into the room.*

ST. GEORGE

Sweet Moll, Sweet Moll, where art thou going,
So early and so soon?
I have something to thee to say,
If yet that thou canst stay.

SWEET MOLL

What hast thou got to say?
Pray tell it to me now,
For I am spending all my time
In what I can't tell how.

ST. GEORGE

Sweet Moll, thy parents and mine had well agreed
That married we should be,
So pull down thy lofty looks,
And fix thy love on me.

SWEET MOLL

But I must have a little boy
Who speaks a peevish tongue;

A pair of silver buckles
That ladies do have on;
And I must have some butcher's meat
Of every sort and kind;
And in the morn a cup of tea,
At night, a glass of wine.

ST. GEORGE

Won't bacon serve thy turn, Sweet Moll,
Some good fat powder puffs?
And in the morn a cup of milk,
And that's the farmer's cut.
Sweet Moll, thou hast no cause
To talk of silver things,
For thou wast not brought up in palaces
Amongst lords, dukes, and kings.
And the little thou hast learnt
Thou hast almost forgot;
And if thou wilt not marry me,
Thou then canst go to rot!

Exit SWEET MOLL. *Enter* LITTLE DICK NIPP

In comes I, Little Dick Nipp,
With my big head, and my little wit.
My head is so big, and my body so small,
Yet I am the biggest rogue of all.
My forehead is lined with brass,
My head is lined with steel,
My trousers touch my ankle bones,
Pray, Doctor, come and feel.

DOCTOR

Yes, yes.

ST. GEORGE

A room! A room! A gallant room!
And let old Beelzebub come in.

Enter BEELZEBUB

In comes old Beelzebub,
On my shoulder I carry my club,
In my hand my dripping-pan.
Don't you think I'm a jolly old man?
A mug of good ale will make us merry and sing.
And a few of your half-crowns and five-shilling pieces
In our pockets would be a very fine thing.

Collection is taken up and dance and carol sung:

Here's health to her stock,
Likewise to his flock;
We'll take this small cup
And we'll drink it all up,
And there's enough to fill it again.

[It seems not to be generally known among students of the popular drama that the St. George Christmas Play was a familiar feature of Boston life in the eighteenth century. The following passage from the "Recollections" of Mr. Samuel Breck will be found of interest.

"I forget on what holiday it was that the Anticks, another exploded remnant of colonial manners, used to perambulate the town. They have ceased to do it now, but I remember them as late as 1782. They were a set of the lowest blackguards, who, disguised in filthy clothes and oftentimes with masked faces, went from house to house in large companies; and, *bon gré, mal gré*, obtruding themselves everywhere, particularly into the rooms that were occupied by parties of ladies and gentlemen, would demean themselves with great insolence. I have seen them at my father's, when his assembled friends were at cards, take possession of a table, seat themselves on rich furniture, and proceed to handle the cards, to the great annoyance of the company. The only way to get rid of them was to give them money, and listen patiently to a foolish dialogue between two or more of them. One of them would cry out, 'Ladies and gentlemen sitting by the fire, put your hands in your pockets and give us our desire.' When this was done, and they had received some money, a kind of acting took place. One fellow was knocked down and lay sprawling on the carpet, while another bellowed out,

'See, there he lies,
But ere he dies
A doctor must be had.'

He calls for a doctor, who soon appears, and enacts the part so well that the wounded man revives. In this way they would continue for half an hour, and it happened not unfrequently that the house would be filled by another gang when these had departed. There was no refusing admittance. Custom had licensed these vagabonds to enter even by force any place they chose. What should we say to such intruders now? Our manners would not brook such usage a moment."¹

In 1753 the General Court passed a law against mummers and pageants in the streets;² but this, I suppose, applied rather to Pope Day celebrations (on November 5th, the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot) than to the St. George performers.³ — G. L. KITTREDGE.]

¹ *Recollections of Samuel Breck with Passages from his Note-Books* (1771-1862), edited by H. E. Scudder, Philadelphia, 1877, pp. 35, 36. Mr. Breck was born in Boston in 1771, and died in Philadelphia in 1862. He began to write his *Recollections* in 1830, and this passage is near the beginning. The greater part of the passage was printed in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for 1877 (liv, 826, 827).

² 26 Geor. II, chap. 3, passed January 5, 1753 (*Temporary Acts*, ed. 1763, pp. 83, 84; *Province Laws*, III, 647, 648).

³ On Pope Day see Matthews in the *Publications of The Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, viii, 90 ff., 104, and Cunningham, in the same *Publications*, xii, 288-295, with the references.